

# **Uncovering the veil of immaterial cultural heritage towards and autonomous management of well-being as well as cultural and territorial preservation**

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## **Abstract**

The joint work for more than three decades with indigenous groups from the Orinoquia and Amazon regions of Colombia has led us to understand immaterial cultural heritage (ICH) both as a catalyst and a mean for building community well-being as well as contributing to cultural and territorial preservation, rather than as a result on itself. This ICH understanding has allowed us to envisage our role as an NGO as that of supporting and accompanying community-based processes that entail ICH as a way of improving people's well-being. In this paper, we focus on our experience with the Piaroa indigenous people- who inhabit the Mataven Forest in the Colombia Amazonia- to unpack our role as an NGO and ICH in three of the ways we enact it:

1). Supporting local ICH research: Topics include agroecological systems, traditional architecture, and handicrafts, all of which have direct and indirect relations with nutrition, gender, means of production, and health. Following an applied research approach, some of the ICH information gathered is refreshed or adapted by the Piaroa people so that it is useful and relevant according to the current context;

2). Building bridges: These are aimed to encourage a respectful interrelation and dialogue between the Piaroa and non-indigenous actors, institutions, and policy-makers related to ICH. These bridges have led to important processes of land rights recognition, formalization of Piaroa's own education systems, and implementation of health models that recognize indigenous' knowledge.

3). Accompanying the Piaroa's own education processes: Both in formal and informal settings, the Piaroa's education encourages the transmission of ICH elements, including the knowledge and skills needed to reproduce the Piaroa's ways of living, thinking, and relating with the ecosystems of the Mataven forests.

These are three of the elements that have allowed us to work with indigenous communities to uncover the veil of immaterial cultural heritage and together understand the practices, knowledge, and skill's systems that have served traditional groups for their

survival, identifying those elements that might be important and valuable for today's context as well. From Etnollano Foundation, we have aimed for slow and long-term processes that prioritize listening, intending to understand the world from an indigenous perspective. Although we have achieved several outcomes, there are still many lessons to learn. We remain open to keep learning and sharing, wanting to be part of a larger global movement committed to learning from those groups that have transmitted through generations ways of living that embrace responsible management of ecosystems, being conscious of their own well-being as well as of the global population's as a whole.